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Polarities : A Study of John Ashbery's "The Tennis Court Oath"

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The status of *The Tennis Court Oath*¹ within Ashbery's works has always been, and probably always will be, problematic. It drew on publication in 1962 reviews ranging mainly from contemptuous dismissals to expressions of polite puzzlement.² Only the critic R. W. Flint of *Partisan Review* seriously grappled with the nature of Ashbery's poetry in this book, and his conclusions about it, though in many places extremely perceptive, were not overall encouraging :

In John Ashbery the dazzling vatic style of Dylan Thomas or Roethke's "The Shape of the Fire" has become something cool, business-like and *very* peculiar. . .³

Flint declares himself at first dismayed by the poems' "extreme disjointedness" but after prolonged "immersion" in them discovers they possess "a tonal unity in no way dependent on meter or even cadence conventionally understood, but rather on a cadence of feeling-sight in which things are coming apart, receding into night and distance, clouding over, or just becoming uncomfortable in a peculiarly sober, visionary, matter-of-fact way." This last cluster of opposed adjectives certainly reflects

something of the book's pervasive spirit of self-contradiction. Flint also judiciously locates the poetry's central trope of ellipsis, and connects its intensive deployment with the poet's desire to escape concepts of the unitary psychological self of most Romantic and post-Romantic poetry :

It is not yet successful but it is interesting. There is no inevitability about it, at least to my eyes and ears, but rather an intense scholastic energy of exclusion, comparable to the Thomist energy of inclusion. If you assume, as many of Ashbery's confrères seem to, that poetry has degenerated into technical formulae and rhetorical gimmicks . . . then there might be a virtue in not only confounding conventional prosody and rhetoric – this has been done already – but also the progressions of mood and tone which identify a poet as a creature of conventional psychology, vulnerable to condescension.⁴

Another aim of this "energy of exclusion" is the near-abolition of ideas of genre, with all subsumed into an aesthetic that Flint sees as both simultaneous and single-toned ; "the poem is to be philosophical, lyric, visionary, confessional, and historical – all at once and uniformly." Perhaps unconsciously, Flint echoes here the kinds of critical language in which Abstract Expressionist painting was often discussed at the time, and which is surely a more apposite context than the one he in fact goes on to suggest :

I have deduced this program myself from reading Mr Ashbery's appallingly inconclusive verse, behind which looms the oldest Ez of the thin late Cantos.⁵

Later critics have also been struck by *The Tennis Court Oath's* seemingly uncompromising arbitrariness. Even those favourable to Ashbery's enter-

prise in the main have expressed frustration with it. Marjorie Perloff complains that the words in a poem like "Leaving the Atocha Station" "remain excessively discrete, refusing to group themselves into larger configurations," so that in the end the reader begins to grow "restless and bored."⁶ Helen Vendler reports herself unimpressed by *The Tennis Court Oath's* "mixture of wilful flashiness and sentimentality,"⁷ while Harold Bloom's response was one of "outrage and disbelief." He finds in the book only one good poem ("A Last World") and wonders how Ashbery "could collapse into such a bog by just six years after *Some Trees*. . . The Ashbery of *The Tennis Court Oath* may have been moved by De Kooning and Kline, Webern and Cage, but he was not moved to the writing of poems. Nor can I accept the notion that this was a necessary phase in the poet's development, for who can hope to find any necessity in this calculated incoherence."⁸ Fred Moramarco, David Shapiro and John Shoptaw are the only critics to have attempted a sustained defence of the collection.⁹

In addition, Ashbery himself has repeatedly expressed uncertainty about its merits:

I was experimenting at the time. I was dissatisfied with the poetry that I was writing, and I was trying to do something new. My way of doing this was by deliberately avoiding writing poetry that sounded like the poetry I had already written – even though it didn't sound like *anything*. That seemed to be the best way of starting to get away from what I had written before – hoping that something valuable would come out of it. Although I don't think that that poem ["Europe"] is very successful, it was a way of trying to obliterate the poetry that at the time was coming naturally to me, and which I didn't like. It was an attempt to shuffle the cards before dealing them again; it was more of a therapy for me than anything that was meant to go into print. I am not displeased that it was published, but I look at it very much as

part of a transitional phase.¹⁰

His *Selected Poems* (1985) includes only eight of *The Tennis Court Oath's* thirty-one poems, and these are mainly the less experimental pieces such as "They Dream Only of America" and "Our Youth." In another interview he declared: "I published *The Tennis Court Oath* and perhaps I shouldn't have done so. If I were submitting the book again I would take out a lot of what is in it, although some of it still interests me."¹¹ The poems he does like from the book were written in what he calls "a kind of intermediate style, say between the poems in *Some Trees* and the poem "Europe". . . I don't know quite why I stopped writing that way, but I feel that those are valid poems in a new way that I might have gone on pursuing, but didn't."¹²

The division between two different styles, one of which he might have developed but didn't, while the other was merely "transitional," is certainly an element in the book's power to infuriate and confuse. *The Tennis Court Oath* is unequivocally the most starkly dualistic of Ashbery's collections; its poems oscillate anxiously between extremes, and seem determined to reject – or are unable to achieve – the tentative mediating quality of so much of Ashbery's later verse, with its bland powers of synthesis, its ability to combine disparate kinds of experience into a variegated but homogenous whole. The potentially grandiose rhetoric of a poem like "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . ." contrasts strangely with the dry impenetrable newspaperese of some of the collage poems, or with the breathlessly banal snippets of pulp fiction interspliced throughout "Europe" and "Idaho." Part of *The Tennis Court Oath's* disconcerting oddity comes from this lack of com-

munication between its idioms. It refuses also to introduce even playfully or parodically a poetic self who might be construed as the origin of its poems, let alone as arbiter of their possible meanings. The continual aesthetic displacement of *Some Trees*, with its reticent de-mythologizing of the self, gives way in this next book to a larger scale, almost epic attempt to dismantle the organic Symbolist lyric. For all its "mass of egregious disjunctiveness,"¹³ to use a phrase of Harold Bloom's, *The Tennis Court Oath* can be understood as embodying in a quite single-minded fashion a search for ways of evading the centripetal psychological ego, and all its allegorical trappings, in the name of a greater mimesis.

An essay of Ashbery's on the poetry of Pierre Reverdy, published also in 1962, articulates most explicitly his dissatisfaction with the Modernist legacy :

A l'inverse des écrivains importants de langue anglaise de ce siècle (Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce), Reverdy parvient à restituer aux choses leur vrai nom, à abolir l'éternel poids mort de symbolisme et d'allégorie qui excède chez les auteurs que j'ai cités. Dans *The Waste Land* d'Eliot, le monde réel apparaît avec les rêves qui lui sont propres, mais il est toujours artificiellement lié à une signification allégorique – l'usine à gaz et le "dull canal", par exemple. Tandis que chez Reverdy un canal ou une usine sont des phénomènes vivants, ils font partie du monde qui nous entoure, dont le souffle cru se fait sentir partout dans sa poésie. C'est comme si on voyait pour la première fois un paysage naturel, n'ayant vu jusque là que des paysages peints.

J'ai toujours regretté que les rythmes sombres d'Eliot et de Yeats, par exemple, soient au service d'une signification précise, et que leur élans poétiques – différents, en cela, du faucon de Yeats – soient comme un cerf-volant dont le fil est fermement tenu par le poète rivé à sa terre. Ce qui nous enchante chez Reverdy, c'est la pureté de sa poésie, faite de changements, fluctuations, arché-

types d'événements, situations idéales, mouvements de formes transparentes, aussi naturels et variés que les vagues de la mer. C'est l'étoffe même de la poésie, sa matière première pure de toute arrière-pensée métaphysique.¹⁴

The "open field of narrative possibilities" (TP, p.41) the poetic of *The Tennis Court Oath* explores can be seen in these terms, as an effort to restore to things their real names and so to escape the burden of having to discover some unifying mythical significance in all events.¹⁵ Some lines from "They Dream Only of America" offer a comic version of this anxiety :

Now he cared only about signs.
Was the cigar a sign?
And what about the key?
He went slowly into the bedroom.

(TCO, p. 13)

This dilemma is certainly present in *Some Trees* but is generally defused by the poems' lyrical excitement and sureness, the pleasurable novelty with which they evoke exotic landscapes and dream-states. Even the earlier more conventional poems collected in *The Tennis Court Oath* exhibit a far less stable relationship between the poetic self and the world outside to which it is trying to relate. Many of these seem to fluctuate dramatically between an unaccommodating solipsism and a sense of help-less dispersal, unable to discover a middle ground between these two absolute opposites.

Both of the irregular sonnets in "Two Sonnets," for example, illustrate this tendency towards polarities. The first is called "Dido":

The body's products become
Fatal to it. Our spit
Would kill us, but we
Die of our heat.
Though I say the things I wish to say
They are needless, their own flame conceives it.
So I am cheated of perfection.

The iodine bottle sat in the hall
And out over the park where crawled roadsters
The apricot and purple clouds were
And our blood flowed down the grating
Of the cream-colored embassy.
Inside it they had a record of "The St. Louis Blues."

(TCO, p. 20)

The first half of the poem suggests a state of dangerous tautology. The self's inversions result in a fatal redundancy; his complete freedom to say the things he wishes to say deprives his words of all context so they become "needless," and the "flame" of their inspiration equally conceals them to the point where the poet seems no longer responsible for them, nor able to terminate them: "So I am cheated of perfection." In contrast to this contracted self-divided inner world, the sestet presents a wholly alien aggregation of random images and objects, connected only by a syntax of jerky disjunctiveness. Any relations the reader manages to establish between the iodine bottle, the roadsters, and the cream-coloured embassy must be purely speculative. Here Ashbery seems to be, in Frank O'Hara's phrase about him, "marrying the whole world,"¹⁶ and one of the effects of this involvement seems to be some kind of Orphic dismemberment: "And our blood flowed down the grating. . ." The poem exists in

the contrast between the imploding self-enclosure of the first seven lines and the meaningless angularity of the outside world amongst which the self is dispersed in the second six lines.

The second sonnet, "The Idiot," also opposes images of a tightly sealed subjectivity with an equally uncontrolled desire to merge wholly with the landscape. The poem is couched in a mock-Romantic diction, and may allude obliquely back to Mallarmé's "Brise Marine":¹⁷

O how this sullen, careless world
 Ignorant of me is! Those rocks, those homes
 Know not the touch of my flesh, nor is there one tree
 Whose shade has known me for a friend.
 I've wandered the wide world over.
 No man I've known, no friendly beast
 Has come and put its nose into my hands.
 No maid has welcomed my face with a kiss.

Yet once, as I took passage
 From Gibraltar to Cape Horn
 I met some friendly mariners on the boat
 And as we struggled to keep the ship from sinking
 The very waves seemed friendly, and the sound
 The spray made as it hit the front of the boat.

(TCO, p. 20)

The plangent extremes of the Idiot's solitude reduce him to a state almost of non-existence, and the stiltedness of the language subtly undermines stock Romantic concepts of a benign responsive nature – "nor is there one tree / Whose shade has known me for a friend." The moment of community he recalls in the sestet also expands comically beyond one's

expectations. The Idiot feels close not only to the "friendly mariners," but to the waves and spray threatening to sink the ship. Again his commitment to the outside world, once released, is in excess, suggesting the poetic self can find no middle way between severe retreat and indiscriminate involvement.

The formal divisions of "Two Sonnets" keep the two extremes neatly in opposition, but in most of the rest of the poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* they are more complexly intertwined, making a condition of contradiction seem the normal state of affairs. "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . ." offers one of the book's most searching and exhilarating dramatizations of the Romantic ego trying to establish for itself a poetic identity at once coherent and responsive, only to find itself continually thwarted by the abysses of the infinite that confront the poet whenever he emerges from the privacy of his own sepulchral cell. The poem's opening lines again contrast different modes of approach to the quest for accommodation in the world:

How much longer will I be able to inhabit the divine sepulcher
Of life, my great love? Do dolphins plunge bottomward
To find the light? Or is it rock
That is searched? Unrelentingly? Huh. And if some day

Men with orange shovels come to break open the rock
Which encases me, what about the light that comes in then?
What about the smell of the light?
What about the moss?

(TCO, p. 25)

Two dominant strains of Romanticism are played off against each other here; on the one hand there is the Coleridgean idea of truth found in the depths of the self ("Do dolphins plunge bottomward / To find the light?"), and on the other there is the less mythopoeic, more Wordsworthian attention to the natural facts of existence – "Or is it rock / That is searched?" Both are rejected by the goofily inert Ashbery ("Huh"), and the "Orphic influx,"¹⁸ to use Bloom's term, is provisionally figured as reaching the typically passive poet by more whimsical, roundabout means. The Romantic analogue that most suits the poet is that of Keats's paralyzed knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci,"¹⁹ suffering some erotic enchantment:

In pilgrim times he wounded me
 Since then I only lie
 My bed of light is a furnace choking me
 With hell (and sometimes I hear salt water dripping).

(TCO, p. 25)

These lines also suggest a variation on the artist-as-victim theme intimated in the sestet of the "Dido" sonnet, and elsewhere in the collection as a whole.²⁰ The visitation emasculates and punishes, and the resulting clarity is unendurable.

Together these three stanzas seem to push up insistently against the limitations of the Romantic lyric,²¹ almost to exhaust its resources, so it is no real surprise that at this point the poem abruptly shifts gear; its idioms start modulating randomly, from childhood boasting ("because I'm one of the few / To have held my breath under the house"), to scraps of pulp fiction, ("the neat villa! . . . If you knew why then professor"), to chance

memories of sex ("the smell of sperm flushed down toilets / On hot summer afternoons within sight of the sea"), and its syntax completely breaks down, disrupted by parentheses something in the manner of Roussel's *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*.²² In typically disjunctive fashion the poem undercuts its formulation of the grand aspirations of Romantic myth-making with a more average awareness of the discontinuous banalities of childhood, sex, low-brow reading, and the everyday processes in general – "Carrying food to mouth, touching genitals. . ." Shapiro is surely right to relate the poem back to some of the concerns of Eliot in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,"²³ but whereas it is implied that Prufrock's salvation depends on a rejection of the snares of human attachments in the name of some higher spiritual truth, the protagonist of this poem merely mimics ideas of the transcendental, and his most satisfying moment is an instant of human communication that occurs in the literal, random way predicted in "*Le livre est sur la table*": "Are there / Collisions, communications on the shore. . . ?" (ST, p. 75):

What a marvel is ancient man !

Under the tulip roots he has figured out a way to be a religious animal
And would be a mathematician. But where in unsuitable heaven
Can he get the heat that will make him grow ?

For he needs something or will forever remain a dwarf,
Though a perfect one, and possessing a normal-sized brain
But he has got to be released by giants from things.
And as the plant grows older it realizes it will never be a tree,

Will probably always be haunted by a bee
And cultivates stupid impressions

So as not to become part of the dirt. The dirt
Is mounting like a sea. And we say goodbye

Shaking hands in front of the crashing of the waves
That give our words lonesomeness, and make these flabby hands seem ours –
Hands that are always writing things
On mirrors for people to see later.

(TCO, p. 26)

Dwarfs and giants occur frequently in Ashbery's poetry but rarely in such a polarized context as here. The plant and tree are likewise emphatically juxtaposed. It is interesting that this trivial but affecting instance of human contact seems also to release the book's most unflinching confrontation with the immensity of the infinite, fear of which stalks so many of its poems. The puny physical nature of "these flabby hands" allows them to be, in the moment, redemptively possessed, and they are endowed with powers of communication which, however oblique or ignored, suggest at least the possibility of some kind of interaction. The dirt "mounting like a sea" and "the crashing of the waves" both threaten and intensify the moment. The lines have something of the precious fragility and realism of Auden's "Lay your sleeping head, my love, / Human on my faithless arm. . ." ²⁴

Like Auden's, Ashbery's poetry is emphatically not one determined by epiphanies or privileged moments. Moramarco correctly discerns in the lines discussed above an attempt "to soar outward from the purely verbal worlds of the poems toward some ineffable perception," ²⁵ but the moment trails off jaggedly, and less exciting or articulable areas of experience return to the poem. The poet retreats into the guise of comic in-

competent : "But no doubt you have understood // It all now and I am a fool. . ." The "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" motif returns explicitly in a stanza of touchingly wistful tenderness, only to be mockingly undone :

After which you led me to water
And bade me drink, which I did, owing to your kindness.
You would not let me out for two days and three nights,
Bringing me books bound in wild thyme and scented wild grasses

As if reading had any interest for me, you. . .

(TCO, p. 27)

The poem's ending returns to the questioning mode in which it began, as the poet's anxiety about his identity and about the nature of the world in which he is trying to locate himself collapses all into an indistinct continuum :

Who are you, anyway ?
And it is the color of sand,
The darkness, as it sifts through your hand
Because what does anything mean. . . ?

(TCO, p. 27)

All the postures the poem has tried on, the pageant of fictions with which its persona has struggled to formulate himself, are dissolved here into a gathering awareness of the abysses of the unknowable. As in "Two Sonnets" and so many other poems in the collection, a kind of schizophrenic split occurs, the poet simultaneously dispersed into the random infinite and imprisoned in the incommunicable core of his sole

self, at once "marrying everything" and shrunkenly embalmed in "lonesomeness":

Am I wonder,
Strategically, and in the light
Of the long sepulcher that hid death and hides me?

(TCO, p. 27)

The oppositional nature of so much of the poetry in *The Tennis Court Oath*, its foregrounding of the dual and the discontinuous, might be seen as an attempt to escape the influence of Wallace Stevens, who is so pervasive a presence in *Some Trees*. Bloom argues that in this book Ashbery "attempted too massive a swerve away from the ruminative continuities of Stevens and Whitman,"²⁶ and certainly very few of these poems recall Stevens in their diction or rhetorical style. It is possible also, though, to see the book's experiments as more general explorations of what happens when the mediating self of the Romantic lyric is dismantled.²⁷ Throughout *The Tennis Court Oath* Stevens's jar in Tennessee is deliberately shattered and its shards scattered over the landscape. In "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . ." it is just about possible to reassemble the fragments and deduce a trajectory for the whole, but the more comprehensively splattered drips of language that make up the collage poems like "America" (TCO, pp. 15–19) or "A Life Drama" (TCO, pp. 39–40) or "The Ascetic Sensualists" (TCO, pp. 51–54) – whose title itself is a self-contradiction – remain obstinately only the sum of their parts. These poems are as interested in dramatizing the dilemma of the failure to understand as they are to illustrate moments of

comprehension.²⁸ Certainly they succeed in breaking down notions of the organizing ego, their streams of disjunct or repeated images, seemingly innocent of purpose or meaning, remaining just so much poetic raw material.

The contradictory nature of experience is embodied in a variety of more suggestive ways in other poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*. The imagery of "Our Youth" for instance is almost oxymoronic, as if the poet were rapidly shuttling between opposite points of view and haphazardly combining them in the same sentence:

Of bricks. . . Who built it? Like some crazy balloon
When love leans on us
Its nights. . . The velvety pavement sticks to our feet.
The dead puppies turn us back on love.

Where we are. Sometimes
The brick arches led to a room like a bubble, that broke when you entered it
And sometimes to a fallen leaf.

(TCO, p. 41)

As Moramarco²⁹ has shown, the solid and the ephemeral, the nice and the nasty, the exotic and the banal, are yoked together here, giving the poetry a kind of see-saw quality that is at once exhilarating and confusing. Like so many of the book's poems, "Our Youth" dramatizes a recognition of death and the disorientations attendant on this. As in "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . .," emotions of wild excitement and fearful dismay are played off against each other:

We knew
 The dead horses. We were discovering coffee,
 How it is to be drunk hot, with bare feet
 In Canada. And the immortal music of Chopin

Which we had been discovering for several months
 Since we were fourteen years old. And coffee grounds,
 And the wonder of hands, and the wonder of the day
 When the child discovers her first dead hand.³⁰

(TCO, p. 41)

Concepts of youth and death do not glide in and out of each other here, as might happen in later Ashbery, but are percussively juxtaposed. As also in "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . ." the protagonist's sense of his identity is radically unstable. His projections grow confused and thwarted, and his sexual and family traumas unnervingly indistinct:

You will never have that young boy,

 That boy with the monocle
 Could have been your father
 He is passing by. No, that other one,
 Upstairs. He is the one who wanted to see you.

He is dead. Green and yellow handkerchiefs cover him.

(TCO, p. 41)

The poem's intensities and frustrations exist side by side, and it ends appropriately by explicitly denying the possibility of any kind of ideal synthesis. The poet departs from his poem as if jumping ship, leaving its

paradoxes unresolved and its divisions simply balanced :

It's true we have not avoided our destiny
By weeding out the old people.
Our faces have filled with smoke. We escape
Down the cloud ladder, but the problem has not been solved.

(TCO, p. 42)

A similar sense of the irreconcilable but simultaneous occurs in the multiple narrative of "They Dream Only of America." Ashbery here conflates at least two separate kinds of discourse. As Perloff points out in her essay "From image to action: the return of story in postmodern poetry,"³¹ the poem oscillates between the language of a murder mystery ("And the murderer's ash tray. . .") and the romantic love story ("He holds a key in his right hand. / "Please," he asked willingly.") The poem again seems to be about the conflict between desire and fear, the anxious self craving both oblivion and contact :

They dream only of America
To be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass :
"This honey is delicious
Though it burns the throat."

(TCO, p. 13)

The abstract fantasy of escape of the first two lines (who are the "they" ? one wonders) is starkly followed by a wholly unrelated remark, even further recessed in speech marks, with the final line in italics as well. In contrast with the vague wishfulness of the opening sentence, this second

declaration seems to emanate from some concrete experience – perhaps sexual – but it is impossible to connect them further than this. Ashbery once compared the way his poetry works with methods of film-making: “It sets up a kind of imaginary field and moves around in it, in an almost cinematic way.”³² In these terms the dominant technique of *The Tennis Court Oath* consists of splicing together the most disparate of shots.

Ideas of art are also caught up into the polarising mode of *The Tennis Court Oath*'s poetic. To take the most obvious example, a poem such as “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (1975) explores a wide-ranging and continually evolving exchange between the poet and the work of art he contemplates, however fraught with paradoxes, illusions, and random shifts of attention this process actually turns out to be. Various poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* intimate that the world of art is in a more absolute way cut off from that of the reader or spectator, and the extent to which, on one level, the book prevents the reader from entering a sustained relationship with the notion of the poet or with his poems, might be seen as an honest, though hardly satisfactory, response to this perception. In “To Redouté,” for example, the poet offers no intermediate response to the work of art, but instead juxtaposes alternatives; on the one hand obsession with the fixed image, and on the other unconditional surrender to the flux. The “oval shape responds” to Redouté's flowers in two steps:

My first is a haunting face
 In the hanging-down hair.
 My second is water:
 I am a sieve.

(TCO, p. 21)

Projection and frustration, possession and dispossession, confront each other in the successive manner of "Two Sonnets." The frozen, evocative moment of art, its yearning compound of memory and desire, is followed by its opposite, a sense of endlessness and the indistinct. The rest of the poem expands and complicates paradoxical aspects of this double response. Art is both continuous and finite; it achieves eternity by crystalizing a single moment, and yet its state of completion and clarity can seem an unwanted rebuke to the messiness of everyday life :

The penalty of light forever
Over the heads of those who were there
And back into the night, the cough of the finishing petal.

(TCO, p. 21)

Ideas of this kind of course look not only forward to "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" but back to, for instance, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." What is interesting and distinctive about "To Redouté" is the dramatic, unmeditative nature of its juxtapositions – the direct surreal yoking of "the cough of the finishing petal," for example. Ashbery also exhibits in the poem an awareness, typical of the book as a whole, of how art, when stripped of its communicative faculties, can be seen as palpable physical substance. The last stanza of the poem separates the idea of art as physical matter from the idea of art as spiritual meaning :

Once approved the magenta must continue
But the bark island sees
Into the light :
It grieves for what it gives :

Tears that streak the dusty firmament.

(TCO, p. 21)

Paint as a physical substance ("magenta") and paint as endowed with powers of representation ("the bark island sees / Into the light") are contrasted here, as the "pale flabby hands" of "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . ." are contrasted with their ability to write on mirrors. The poem's lyrical ending, with its suggestion that art, by expressing our loss, allows some kind of relationship with the world, seems to depend on the simultaneous awareness that the picture can also be seen as just so much canvas and pigment.

This need to stress the palpable in art is obviously most fully gratified in the collage poems, which have been written off as aberrations by many of Ashbery's most purposeful critics, but are seen, on the other hand, by the enormous and thriving band of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, writers such as Ron Silliman, Clark Coolidge, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, as radically fertile experiments that helped open up a whole new range of poetics. Ron Silliman is surely thinking of these poems in particular when he lists *The Tennis Court Oath* as a seminal text for his movement in the introduction to his anthology of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing, *In the American Tree*,³³ and in the long poem ABC he acknowledges the debt further, phonetically rewriting the opening line of "Leaving the Atocha Station": Ashbery's "The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness" (TCO, p. 33) becomes in Silliman's version "the arctic bunny hopped over the retort, moss at the base of dwarf cypress."³⁴

The poems can also of course be related to innovations in other art forms; to the drip-painting of Jackson Pollock, or to the musical experiments of such as John Cage, or Berio, or Webern.³⁵ Ashbery's focus on words as entities, so foregrounded in poems such as "Europe," "The Lozenges," "The Ascetic Sensualists," is present to some extent both in *Some Trees* and in much of his following work as well, and, in broad terms, it clearly fits in with the techniques and ambitions of Postmodern art in general. It can also, though, be connected back to earlier writers in whom Ashbery is interested. Roussel, for instance, describes in *Comment J'ai Ecrit Certains de Mes Livres*³⁶ how he would take a common phrase or line of poetry and deconstruct it into a series of words with similar sounds. From a line of Victor Hugo's, "Un vase tout rempli du vin de l'esperance," he derives the words "*sept houx rampe lit Vesper*."³⁷ He would then set himself to write a tale using all the given elements. In this case the story describes how Handel used seven bunches of holly tied with different coloured ribbons to compose, on a banister, the principal theme of his oratorio *Vesper*. His *Textes de Grande Jeunesse ou Textes-Genèse* – a typical pun – return to the sentence with which they began, but by changing a single letter alter the meaning of all the words inside it. "Les lettres du blanc sur le vieux billard" begins "Parmi Les Noirs" (the letters in chalk on the old billiard table cushion). In the final sentence *billard* becomes *pillard*. The story itself sets about explaining how a white man stranded in darkest Africa sends letters home by jungle pigeon about an old plunderer who holds him captive.³⁸

Part of Ashbery's fascination with Roussel must derive from this kind of exploration of the narrative possibilities of language when treated as substance, his use of the physical shape and sound of words and

their purely accidental relationship with other words to create a literature seemingly motivated only on the level of language itself.

Gertrude Stein³⁹ also developed ways of suggesting the autonomous self-generative nature of language, especially in her poetry. *Stanzas in Meditation* is perhaps her masterpiece in this, a seemingly endless poem written using the simplest vocabulary, disjunct syntax, eccentric punctuation, and an oblique, mainly undisclosed story-line. The review Ashbery wrote on its posthumous publication in 1957 throws an interesting light on facets of his own work, especially in *The Tennis Court Oath*:

There is certainly plenty of monotony in the 150-page title poem which forms the first half of this volume, but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power. These austere "stanzas" are made up almost entirely of colorless connecting words such as "where", "which", "these", "of", "not", "have", "about", and so on, though now and then Miss Stein throws in an orange, a lilac, or an Albert to remind us that it really is the world, our world, that she has been talking about. The result is like certain monochrome de Kooning paintings in which isolated strokes of color take on a deliciousness they never could have had out of context, or a piece of music by Webern in which a single note on the celesta suddenly irrigates a whole desert of dry, scratchy sounds in the strings.⁴⁰

Like so much of Ashbery's poetry, *Stanzas in Meditation* continually thwarts the reader's attempt to find for it some kind of explicatory context, and so familiarize its patterns and defuse its uniqueness. By its seemingly random or merely musical variation and repetition of the most banally utilitarian phrases and sentences, *Stanzas in Meditation*, Ashbery argues, dramatizes not feelings about life, but the feel of life itself:

As we get deeper into the poem, it seems not so much as if we were reading as living a rather long period of our lives with a houseful of people. Like people, Miss Stein's lines are comforting or annoying or brilliant or tedious. Like people, they sometimes make no sense and sometimes make perfect sense; or they stop short in the middle of a sentence and wander away, leaving us alone for awhile in the physical world, that collection of thoughts, flowers, weather, and proper names. And, just as with people, there is no real escape from them: one feels that if one were to close the book one would shortly re-encounter the Stanzas in life, under another guise. . .

Stanzas in Meditation gives one the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a "plot", though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on. Sometimes the story has the logic of a dream. . . [He quotes from the poem] while at other times it becomes startlingly clear for a moment, as though a change in the wind had suddenly enabled us to hear a conversation that was taking place some distance away. . . [He quotes from the poem]. But it is usually not events which interest Miss Stein, rather it is their "way of happening", and the story of *Stanzas in Meditation* is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars. The poem is a hymn to possibility; a celebration of the fact that the world exists, that things can happen.⁴¹

As this last paragraph makes clear, the poem also dismantles the notion of the all-signifying, all-controlling self. Ashbery suggests that Stein's grasp of her material is as fragmentary and random as one's grasp of life tends to be. This seeming incompleteness, though, is really a means to a more inclusive openness. Instead of presenting a single narrative wrought out of the author's biography, it offers an "all-purpose model" the reader can relate to on his or her own terms. The organic poem's ideal form of a beginning, middle, and end⁴² is also undermined by Stein's conception in *Stanzas in Meditation* of life as a process as infinitely varied as it is incon-

clusive. In Ashbery's and Stein's all-over aesthetic, *in medias res* is the only possible stance towards experience :

Both *Stanzas in Meditation* and *The Golden Bowl* are ambitious attempts to transmit a completely new picture of reality, of that *real* reality of the poet which Antonin Artaud called "*une réalité dangereuse et typique*". If these works are highly complex and, for some, unreadable, it is not only because of the complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening, in an attempt to draw our attention to another aspect of its true nature. Just as life is constantly being altered by each breath one draws, just as each second of life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of elaboration which gives the work of these two writers a texture of bewildering luxuriance – that of a tropical rain-forest of ideas – seems to obey some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening.⁴³

The most disjunctive poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* can be seen as experimental assays at achieving an all-over poetry that would be closer to this "*real* reality" than any mediated by more conventional rhetorical strategies. Like Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* they work predominantly through variation and repetition, infusing words chosen through random associations of sound and sense with a significance impossible to quantify or explain. The effect is similar to that discerned by Ashbery in Webern's music or de Kooning's monochrome paintings; some phrases emerge from the grey pulped texture of these poems full of a startling resonance, and a single coherent sentence can seem a tremendous celebration of our powers of communication. The flat syncopated lines of "America" throw up images both lyrical and surreal: "Autumn brushes the hair" (TCO, p. 16); "petals armed with a chain" (TCO, p. 17); "Tears,

hopeless adoration, passions / the fruit of carpentered night" (TCO, p. 19) ; while the poem's one long line gathers up several earlier references to a janitor and releases him with satisfying fullness into a fragment of narrative :

stirred in his sleep the janitor reaches for the wrench with which he'll kill the intruder. . .

(TCO, p. 17)

In a paradoxical way, the abstractness of the context is what makes the words in these poems so concrete. They are deprived not only of symbolic range, in the manner praised in Reverdy, but almost of powers of representation altogether :

old eat
members with their chins
so high up rats
relaxing the cruel discussion
suds the painted corners
white most aerial
garment crow

(TCO, p. 33)

This comes from "Leaving the Atocha Station," the poem dismissed by Marjorie Perloff and championed by Ron Silliman. Reading the poem is a bit like trying to understand a newspaper or listen to the radio in a foreign language, with odd disconnected words combining to form a garbled nonsense. Our attention and speculations are engaged by individual words or phrases, giving us the feeling of being in the middle of things,

having to struggle to make sense of the immediate and disparate, but with no clear sense of the whole they might constitute.

Much of Ashbery's attraction to the neutral all-accommodating world of poems like "America" or "Leaving the Atocha Station" must lie in the extent to which they diffuse the poetic self across the flat, undifferentiating and seemingly autonomous surface of the poem. The project is similar to that of "They Dream Only of America," "to be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass" (TCO, p.13). Another of Ashbery's methods of disguising or neutralizing the demands of the self is to use other people's words. This happens throughout his career, most strikingly in his choice of titles already used by other people. Four of his books borrow or share their titles with existing artworks (*The Tennis Court Oath*, *The Double Dream of Spring*, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, *Houseboat Days*),⁴⁴ while countless poems in all of his books are similarly in debt: "The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers," "Faust," "Rain," "Civilization and its Discontents," "Clepsydra," "The Skaters," "The Task," "As You Came From the Holy Land," "Scheherazade," "Hard Times," "The Skaters," "The Lonedale Operator," "Gorboduc,"⁴⁵ and so on. Others are derived from lines within earlier poems: "As One Put Drunk into the Packet Boat," "The Gazing Grain," "Lost and Found and Lost Again," "Too Happy, Happy Tree."⁴⁶ The title of the first poem in *Shadow Train*, "The Pursuit of Happiness," comes straight from the Declaration of Independence. The most extreme example of this tendency in Ashbery is his uncollected cento "To a Waterfowl"⁴⁷ (the title comes from William Cullen Bryant) whose 52 lines are all quotations, mostly famous ones, from other writers; these include Donne, Milton, Elizabeth Bishop, Samuel

Johnson, Keats, Marvell, Shelley, Arnold, Tennyson, Pope, Stevens, Wyatt, Waller, Yeats, Eliot, Shakespeare, Hardy, and Browning. "Hoboken,"⁴⁸ another uncollected poem, is an even stranger performance; all its lines are culled straight from a Roget's Thesaurus.

This kind of use of the pre-existing or second-hand in new contexts is of course typical of Postmodern art. Obvious examples include Borges's Pierre Menard who recomposes chapters of *Don Quixote*,⁴⁹ Burroughs's cut-ups,⁵⁰ Larry Rivers's subversive repainting of "Washington Crossing the Delaware,"⁵¹ Rauschenberg's famous erasure of a de Kooning drawing. *The Tennis Court Oath* contains two of Ashbery's most radical experiments in this manner in the long poem "Europe" and in the book's final poem "Idaho." Both these use pulp fiction for their source material. "Europe" contains long quotations and scissored snippets from an English First World War propaganda novel by William Le Queux called *Beryl of the Biplane*,⁵² while "Idaho" conflates English and American styles of popular fiction.

Harold Bloom dismisses "Europe" as a "long spiel" and "a fearful disaster."⁵³ It is certainly Ashbery's most sustained rejection of the Romantic inheritance to which most of his earlier and his succeeding poems can be seen, from whatever distance, to relate. The poem is the fullest extension of the process of "questioning, dismantling, and, perhaps, demolishing"⁵⁴ which Ashbery's later poetry backed away from, though, he has suggested, it may be that his later work has gained a certain "depth" from such experiments. Much of this later work presents a poetic self neutralized into a state of potentiality, suspended in a kind of receptive ambiguity between the promptings of the self and the claims of the world around, and the poetry that results can often be seen as a record of

the dialogue between the two. The poet of "Europe," in contrast, seems annihilated by the contingencies that not only overwhelm his text but actually form its substance. Bloom upbraids Ashbery as Stevens might have done, for not resisting sufficiently the "pressure of reality."⁵⁵ But Ashbery is not as interested in resisting this pressure as he is in finding out what happens if it is surrendered to. In this context – or rather absence of all context – Le Queux's ridiculous prose takes on a kind of desperate heroism. The episode of the searchlight with which "Europe" concludes is in fact, in the original, part of a plot by a German spy who has infiltrated a Yorkshire village under the pseudonym of Mr Aylesworth. His searchlight is to guide German planes to a secret landing strip. Ashbery has not changed a word, though he has omitted some, and arranged the prose into lines, and added the poem's final word, "breath." After so much incoherence, the sustained grammatical sentences of this final passage seem suffused with an extraordinary clarity. The morse signals flashed into the sky gesture equally to the excitement and impossibility of communication in a way that is typical of *The Tennis Court Oath's* consistently unreconciled dualities, while the notion of poetry as self-expression is conclusively undercut by the fact that the lines are wholly borrowed. "Europe" reveals Ashbery at his most resolutely ineffable. Communication with the poet is either completely blocked, or, when it seems to occur, turns out to have been in someone else's words. The poem is at once autistic, an impenetrable defence of the poet's solipsism, and wholly surrendered to the arbitrary contingencies of the outside world. It is Ashbery's terminal dramatization of the schismatic consciousness that dominates the book as a whole.

One of the most impoverishing aspects of "Europe," and of the collage poems as a whole, is their rejection of the metaphorical. They explore ways of keeping things separate – the fragmentation of "Europe" into 111 sections is a good example of this⁵⁶ – rather than means of relation or connection. The poems are full of self-sufficient linguistic units that lead nowhere and have no apparent relationship with their surroundings. *Some Trees* ostentatiously used odd forms such as the sestina or pantoum as ways of artificially imposing patterns upon the free play of the mind's associations, and an interesting, almost quizzical relationship is established between form and content in poems like "A Pastoral" (ST, pp. 72 – 73) or "The Painter" (ST, pp. 54 – 55). The more absolutist poetics of *The Tennis Court Oath* strain to get beyond such rhetorical refractions to a less mediated sense of reality. Again, a sentence from Ashbery's essay on Roussel clarifies this ideal:

In *Nouvelles Impressions* the unconscious seems to have broken through the myths in which Roussel had carefully encased it: it is no longer the imaginary world but the real one, and it is exploding around us like a fireworks factory, in one last dazzling orgy of light and sound.⁵⁷

Even the book's most formal poem, the sestina "Faust," is actually about the exorcism of its own mythical and formal elements. Like "The Painter," "Faust" explores ideas of life and art and the ever-shifting boundaries between them, but where the painter achieves some kind of artistic martyrdom, the theatrical world of "Faust" is shown fading greyly into the indeterminate and everyday, and this is made to seem an inevitable result of the form's logic. The theatre and the real world collapse into

each other, and the opera disintegrates back into its most basic property, "a bare sunlit stage." The poem ends up contrasting the insistent closures of its own formal requirements with its sense of life continuing beyond its scope:

In the wings the tenor hungers
For the heroine's convulsive kiss, and Faust
Moves forward, no longer young, reappearing

And reappearing for the last time. The opera
Faust would no longer need its phantom.
On the bare, sunlit stage the hungers could begin.

(TCO, pp. 47 – 48)

The only poem Bloom exempts from his strictures on the volume, "A Last World," can also be read in terms of the self-abolishing aesthetics of "Faust," and it too, though in a more complex way, attempts to probe beneath its own metaphors with the aim of uncovering the archetypal situations from which they evolved. I would agree with Bloom that "A Last World" is the book's best poem, though by no means its only interesting one, and add that part of its power derives from its success in suggesting ways out of the poetic impasse dramatized by "Europe" and the other collage poems. It emerges out of the same basic dilemma: how to project satisfactorily into the world a self that craves either solipsistic withdrawal or universal contact, and sometimes both at the same time, but nothing in between. But whereas they respond by refusing all metaphors, in "A Last World" Ashbery goes to the opposite extreme, turning the poem into nothing *but* metaphors, the more mixed the better.

The poem's apocalyptic title is apt. The poet presents himself in it at an absurdly impossible distance from the Romantic dream of a prelapsarian congruence between names and things, struggling in a miasma of shifting syntax and lost significance:

The mark of things belongs to someone
But if that somebody was wise
Then the whole of things might be different
From what it was thought to be in the beginning, before an angel bandaged
the field glasses.

(TCO, p. 56)

Paradoxically, the desperateness of his situation releases the poet into a state of unconditional freedom. The impotence of his position is continually insisted upon – “one can never change the core of things, and light burns you the harder for it” – but it means his metaphors can be formulated in the most extravagant of terms:

Still it is not too late for these things to die
Provided that an anemone will grab them and rush them to the wildest
heaven.

(TCO, p. 56)

This figurative redundancy – which is to become one of Ashbery's trademarks – is in this poem almost epically contrasted with an unfallen, pre-metaphorical world, which oddly corresponds with the self-contained purely literal use of language in “Europe” and “America”:

Then one could say nothing hear nothing

Of what the great time spoke to its divisors.
 All borders between men were closed.
 Now all is different without having changed. . .

(TCO, p. 56)

"A Last World" can be read as an alternative to the escapist ideal of an autonomous, non-figurative language cherished by the collage poems. They attempt to reduce all to a minimalist single dimension. "A Last World" instead expands everything cosmically into a multiplicity of different dimensions, confounding its tenses and scrambling its imagery, improvising its metaphors, rather than programming scraps of language into randomness. Ashbery reverses their yearning for unmediated simplicity by evoking an archetypal prehistoric world in luridly prejudiced terms:

Man is never without woman, the neuter sex
 Casting up her equations, looks to her lord for loving kindness
 For man never smiles at woman. . .

(TCO, p. 56)

Our epic ideals of origins, of the literal truth of our situation, are here revealed as in fact nothing but the most blatant of metaphors.

"A Last World" also achieves a solution of sorts to the dilemma of the violently oscillating self of "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . .," "Two Sonnets" and so on. The poet's absolutist desire either to reject the outside world or to be assimilated utterly into its arbitrary and infinite phenomena gives way in this poem to a humbler sense of participation:

As it falls along the house, your treasure
Cries to the other men; the darkness will have none of you, and you are
folded into it like mint into the sound of haying. . .

(TCO, p. 57)

This harks back of course to the haphazard wonder of "Some Trees." The main difference, and – in the context of Ashbery's overall career – advance, is the extent to which here the metaphors are generating their own sense of reality. Behind "Some Trees" lies a particular "this morning," and part of the poet's joy stems from his not feeling responsible for the "comeliness" with which the trees surround him. In "A Last World" there is no anterior specific scene to which Ashbery is responding, and by rights, he ought to feel himself the sole cause of the poem's existence. In fact though, the metaphors, like the trees, are assumed to have a life of their own in which the poet himself is only casually present. Similes mysteriously assume palpable existence:

And from a tremendous height twilight falls like a stone and hits you. . .
What have you got there in your hand?
It is a stone. . .

(TCO, p. 57)

In this fluid confusion of the metaphorical and the physical the self can remain unobtrusively a part of things, suspended among them, neither seeking to escape wholly into them nor from them, though the temptations of the indistinct are still quite strong:

He wished to go far away from himself.

There were no baskets in those jovial pine-tree forests, and the waves pushed
 without whitecaps
 In that foam where he wished to be.

(TCO, p. 56)

"A Last World" is certainly the most vatic of Ashbery's earlier poems. It imitates the epic investigations of First Causes of a poem like Auden's "Sonnets from China,"⁵⁸ though it adds to this type of language the mad intensity of the poet of *The Orators*. A prophetic "we" takes over the last quarter of the poem, the poet's enterprise becoming representative of a generic quest in a way unimaginable in nearly all of the other poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*, except "Faust," and this is again more in the mode of the determination of Some Trees to "see us as we truly behave" (ST, p. 9). But the "we" of "A Last World" is less coolly detached than the "we" of "Two Scenes"; it is engaged in some desperate undertaking that culminates in a confrontation with death as oblique and impossible as Childe Roland's Dark Tower, or Theseus's minotaur in *The Heroes*, which is nothing but "a stupid unambitious piece of stage machinery" (TPL, p. 4). Ashbery's delight in metaphor here wittily spans and defers the abysses which other poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* can only grimly confront, clutching the spars of language:

And of the other things death is a new office building filled with modern
 furniture,
 A wise thing, but which has no purpose for us.

(TCO, p. 58)

Like "Faust" the poem concludes with the exhaustion of its own met-

aphorical being, though this happens in suitably apocalyptic language. Fictions can embroider our journey, indeed will accompany us to the very last, but are unable to alter final necessities, and "light burns you the harder" for trying to make them do so. Even the most passionate speculation is consumed in the moment:

Everything is being blown away;
A little horse trots up with a letter in its mouth, which is read with eagerness
As we gallop into the flame.

(TCO, p. 58)

Bloom finds here a "radiance" that is "a revisionary completion of the difficult serenity of late Stevens,"⁵⁹ and compares the poem with "Lebensweisheitspielerei." It is interesting to note, though, how un-Stevensian the diction and lineation are, how completely the poetry is happening in what have come to seem Ashbery's own unique terms. The futile letter and the pantomime horse both develop into stock Ashbery properties. Appropriately for a book so riven with dualities, its longest poem may conclude in someone else's language, but its best poem ends up triumphantly in Ashbery's own.

1. *The Tennis Court Oath*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1962.
2. For example: Mona Van Duyn in *Poetry*, (Chicago), 100 (Summer 1962), p. 393: "If a state of continuous exasperation, a continuous frustration of expectation, a continuous titillation of the imagination are sufficient response to a series of thirty-one poems then these have been successful. But to be satisfied with such a response I must change my notion of poetry." John Simon in *Hudson Review* (Autumn 1962), p. 458: "In another poem, 'Europe,' which seems to be autobiographical, section ten reads, in its enti-

rety, "He had mistaken his book for garbage." I do not think it is up to us to know better than the poet." Samuel Morse in *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring 1962), p. 330: "The publisher's blurb says that these "words painstakingly chosen as conveyors of precise meaning, not as representations of sound . . . in the end create by their clashing interplay a structure of dazzling brilliance and strong emotional impact." So be it. But to quote from Ashbery again, "I don't understand wreckage."

3. *Partisan Review*, 473 (Spring 1962), p. 290.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 291.
6. Marjorie Perloff, "Fragments of a Buried Life," Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, p. 78.
7. Helen Vendler, "Understanding Ashbery," *The New Yorker* (March 16, 1981), reprinted in Bloom, *Critical Views*, (all page references to this publication) p. 180.
8. Harold Bloom, "The Charity of the Hard Moments," in his *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) pp. 169–209, reprinted in Bloom, *Critical Views*, (all page references to this publication) p. 53.
9. In his essay "The Lonesomeness of Words: A Revaluation of *The Tennis Court Oath*" (Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, pp. 150–162) Moramarco argues that "despite all the innovations and avant-garde qualities in *The Tennis Court Oath*, many of the poems in the volume may be examined and responded to in a rather traditional literary fashion" (p. 158). He offers close readings of "A Life Drama" and "Our Youth," suggesting that they should be seen in the context of Ashbery's interest in the attempts of Raymond Roussel to construct "a reality generated solely by language itself" (p. 151). In his chapter on the volume in *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) David Shapiro focuses on Ashbery's experiments in collage. The success of the poems, he maintains, derives from Ashbery's skillful "distribution of the elements of discontinuity so that they are just held in balance, or framed, by the fewest necessary cohesive elements" (p. 61). He discusses many of the book's poems and suggests a diverse range of contexts that include Jasper Johns, Hölderlin, Arnold Schoenberg, and T.S. Eliot. In conclusion he argues that "the dramatic immediacy of the collages of *The Tennis Court Oath* is . . . never

equalled, and it seems that its particular disjunct style had, for the author, reached its limit" (pp. 79–80). In his essay "Investigating *The Tennis Court Oath*" in *Verse*, vol. 8, no. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 61–71, John Shoptaw interprets the book's disjunctions, obliquities, and general fascination with codes and acts of detection in more political terms as a response to the repressions – and especially the homophobia – of the McCarthyite fifties. He argues that Ashbery's cutting up of Le Queux's patriotic platitudes can be seen as an act of subversion directed against all repressive ideologies, but particularly against the politics incarnated in the House of un-American activities.

10. Osti, "The Craft of John Ashbery," p. 94. Further negative comments about *The Tennis Court Oath* occur in Bloom / Losada "Craft Interview with John Ashbery," p. 16: "For instance, the poem "Europe", the long poem in that book, is one that's no longer very close to me. At the time I wrote it I was baffled as to what to do in poetry; I wasn't satisfied with the way my work was going and I felt it was time to just clear my head by writing whatever came into it and that's very much the case with that poem; and I think it helped me along but I don't value it as much as ones I've written since."
11. "John Ashbery: An Interview with John Murphy," *Poetry Review*, London (Volume 75, No. 2, August 1985) p. 20.
12. Peter Stitt "The Art of Poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery," *Paris Review*, New York, (Volume 25, No. 90, Winter 1983, pp. 30–59), reprinted in *Poets at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* edited by George Plimpton, introduction by Donald Hall (New York: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 411. All page references to this publication). In his interview with John Ash for *PN Review*, Manchester, ("John Ashbery in conversation with John Ash," Volume 12, No. 2, pp. 31–34) Ashbery takes up this point again: "I could have developed the earlier style further and I've no idea why I didn't. I probably should have done" (p. 31).
13. Bloom, *Critical Views*, p. 53.
14. John Ashbery, "Reverdy en Amérique," *Mercure de France*, [Special Issue: Pierre Reverdy], Paris, no. 344 (January/April 1962) pp. 111–112. Reverdy is an important figure for the New York poets. Kenneth Koch mentions him in "Fresh Air" as one of the great poets indubitably "of our time" (*Selected Poems* (New York, Vintage Books, 1985), p. 38). Frank O'Hara concludes his

"A Step Away From Them" (*The Collected Poems*, edited by Donald Allen, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) p. 257-258) by invoking Reverdy's name almost as a charm: "My heart is in my/ pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy." Ashbery has himself translated a number of Reverdy's poems into English. See *The Poetry of Surrealism* edited by Michael Bendedikt (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975) for translations by Ashbery of Reverdy's "L'Invasion," "Clair Hiver," "Encore L'Amour," "Voyages Sans Fin," and "Ce Souvenir," pp. 74 - 79.

15. In a review of *Weathers and Edges* by Philip Booth Ashbery sarcastically notes: "Rare is the grain of sand in which he can't spot the world; seagulls, dories, and schools of herring are likewise windows giving on eternity, until we begin to suspect that he is in direct, hot-line communication with it" ("Tradition and Talent," *Book Week*, New York, (III. 52, 4 Sept. 1966), p. 14.
16. The phrase is used in "Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's", O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, p. 266.
17. Certainly the image of the sailors' camaraderie in the face of possible shipwreck seems to derive from the concluding lines of Mallarmé's poem:

Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
Sont-ils de ceux qu'un vent penche sur les naufrages
Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertile ilots. . .
Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots!

Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Mary Ann Caws (New York: A New Directions Book, 1982) p. 16.

18. Bloom, *Critical Views*, p. 8.
19. John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, edited by Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970) pp. 500 - 506.
20. See for instance "Rain": "Words drip from the wound. . ." (TCO, p. 31).
21. Shapiro suggests the poem can be seen as "parodied Hölderlin" (Shapiro, *John Ashbery*, p. 65). The Hölderlin poem to which it most directly relates is "Do Ich Ein Knabe War. . ." (Friedrich Hölderlin, Eduard Mörike, *Selected Poems* translated and with an introduction by Christopher Middleton (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 3).
22. Ashbery considers this poem Roussel's "masterpiece." It has four cantos, each of which begins straightforwardly, but is soon interrupted by an end-

less stream of subsidiary thoughts, each enclosed in a new pair of brackets. By the middle of the poem there are as five pairs of parentheses in operation. In his essay "Re-establishing Raymond Roussel," *Portfolio and Art-news Annual*, 6, (Autumn 1962) reprinted as "On Raymond Roussel" in *How I Wrote Certain Of My Books* trans. Trevor Winkfield (New York: Sun, 1977, all page references to this publication) Ashbery notes that the result of so many "bristling parentheses" is "a tumultuous impression of reality which keeps swiping at one like the sails of a windmill" (p. 54).

23. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 13-17. Shapiro calls the poem "Prufrockian . . . one of the most traditional, the most Eliotic, of Ashbery's poems" (Shapiro, *John Ashbery*, p. 65). While in the essay quoted above on Reverdy Ashbery explicitly rejects certain Symbolist implications of Eliot's aesthetic, his own poetry yet contains many references - though often parodic ones - to Eliot's writings. For instance, these lines from "The Suspended Life":

In the hay states of Pennsylvania and Arkansas
I lay down and slept

(TCO, p. 37)

obviously mock Eliot's line in *The Waste Land*: "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept" (Eliot, *The Complete Poems*, p. 67).

24. Auden, *Collected Poems*, p. 131.
25. Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, p. 157.
26. Bloom, *Critical Views*, p. 50. Moramarco in turn argues that Bloom's distaste for the volume derives from the fact that "it does not neatly fit into his reductionist scheme of "revisionary ratios" (Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, p. 151).
27. In his interview with Osti Ashbery remarks: "I feel that in *The Tennis Court Oath* what I was probably doing at the time, was taking poetry apart to try to understand how it works" (Osti, "The Craft of John Ashbery," p. 95). He describes the poetic period in which the book was written as one of "questioning, dismantling, and, perhaps, demolishing" (Ibid.).
28. In interview Ashbery has suggested that the volume "presents, in a sort of concrete way, something that is unintelligible as well as some things that are intelligible. And this was the dilemma of understanding that I was actu-

- ally trying to duplicate or, rather, reproduce in the poems" (Osti, "The Craft of John Ashbery," p. 95).
29. Lehman, *Beyond Amazement*, pp. 158–162.
 30. Just as the "shaking" hands of "How Much Longer Shall I Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . ." (TCO, p. 26) might be seen either as trembling or as engaged in a handshake, so this "dead hand" might be seen either as a confrontation with mortality or as merely suffering from pins-and-needles.
 31. Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the poetry of the Pound tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) pp. 161–163. Jonathan Culler also analyses the poem's braiding together of different genres in his *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1975), p. 169. See also John Shoptaw's discussion of this poem as charting an explicitly gay romance in "Investigating *The Tennis Court Oath*," *Verse*, vol. 8, no. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 65–67.
 32. Osti, "The Craft of John Ashbery," p. 87.
 33. *In the American Tree* edited by Ron Silliman, (Orono: University of Maine at Orono, 1986), p. XVII. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Bruce Andrews has praised *The Tennis Court Oath* as "a critique of clarity and transparency" (quoted by Shoptaw in "Investigating *The Tennis Court Oath*," *Verse*, vol. 8, no. 1, Spring 1991, p. 61). See also Charles Bernstein's "The Influence of Kinship Patterns Upon Perception of an Ambiguous Stimulus," an oblique poetic homage to Ashbery (*ibid.*, pp. 73–77).
 34. Ron Silliman, *ABC* (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 1983), unpaginated. Ashbery has himself expressed bemused interest in the achievements of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. In his *PN Review* interview with John Ash he remarks: "I like some of the Language Poets though I've no idea what their movement is all about." He singles out Clark Coolidge as "quite a wonderful poet who has gone farther than I would care to in a direction that attracts me very much, and I'm sort of grateful to him for having done so" ("John Ashbery in Conversation with John Ash," p. 31).
 35. In his *PN Review* interview he talks of the importance of Webern and Berio to the experiments of *The Tennis Court Oath*: "I used to go to the Domaine Musicale concerts in Paris regularly and Webern was often played at that time. I remember hearing the two cantatas which particularly stimulated me . . . I was living in a foreign country trying to rethink my attitude

towards my language, and by isolating words and phrases and looking for the kind of timbre you find in Webern's very sparse works I felt I could do something interesting . . . I remember also being impressed by Berio's *Hommage* to Joyce. I rather liked the kind of smear effect he did on the poems of Joyce and in my own humble way I was trying to do something like that in those problematic poems" ("John Ashbery in conversation with John Ash," p. 32). The music of John Cage had made an impact on Ashbery several years previous to this. In his introduction to *The Collected Poems* of Frank O'Hara he records: "We were both tremendously impressed by David Tudor's performance at a concert on New Year's Day 1952 of John Cage's "Music of Changes," a piano work lasting over an hour and consisting, as I recall, entirely of isolated, autonomous tone-clusters struck seemingly at random all over the keyboard. It was aleatory music, written by throwing coins in a method adapted from the *I Ching*. The actual mechanics of the method escaped me then as it does now; what mattered was that chance elements could combine to produce so beautiful and cogent a work. It was a further, perhaps for us ultimate proof not so much of "Anything goes" but "Anything can come out" (Introduction to *The Collected Poems* of Frank O'Hara, p. IX).

36. *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*, (Paris: Librairie Alphonse Lemerre, 1935).
37. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 225 - 236. The method of composition is explained on pp. 4 - 5.
39. Gertrude Stein is also seen by Ron Silliman as a precursor of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry in his introduction to *In the American Tree*, p. XVII.
40. John Ashbery, "The Impossible," *Poetry*, (Chicago) vol. 90, no. 4 (July 1957) (Review of Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*) p. 250. See also his essay of 1971 "Gertrude Stein," (RS, pp. 106 - 111).
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 250 - 251.
42. Stein's poem blandly ends: "These stanzas are done" (*Stanzas in Meditation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956) p. 151).
43. Ashbery, "The Impossible," p. 251.
44. The paintings are by David, de Chirico, Parmigianino, and R. B. Kitaj respectively. (Kitaj's *Houseboat Days* was painted specifically for Ashbery's volume.)

45. The allusions are to works by, respectively: Marvell, Goethe, Edward Thomas, Freud, Charles Cotton, Cowper, Sir Walter Raleigh, Rimsky-Korsakov, Dickens, Meyerbeer, D. W. Griffith, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville.
46. These titles are drawn from, respectively: Marvell's "Tom May's Death," Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death. . .," T. S. Eliot's "East Coker," and Keats's "In drear-nighted December."
47. *Locus Solus* [Special Issue: Collaborations], 2, (Summer 1961), pp. 7-9.
48. *Semi-Colon*, New York, 1.3 (1955?), pp. 1-2.
49. Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in *Labyrinths* edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 62-71.
50. Three of Burroughs's collages - cut-ups of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* - were published in *Locus Solus* II, pp. 148-151.
51. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1953.
52. William Le Queux, *Beryl of the Biplane: Being the Romance of an Air-woman of to-day* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1917).
53. Bloom, *Critical Views*, p. 51.
54. Osti, "The Craft of John Ashbery," p. 95.
55. Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) p. 22.
56. In his interview with Osti Ashbery explains his purpose in this: "I was aiming at making a lot of splintered fragments and collecting them all under a series of numbers. It is rather discouraging to look ahead and see how many are still to come. This kind of discouragement - which affects you, for instance, when you open a foreign grammar and see how many lessons are ahead - is one thing that I wanted to get into it" (Osti, "The Craft of John Ashbery,") p. 94.
57. "On Raymond Roussel," in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, trans. Winkfield, p. 55.
58. Auden, *Collected Poems*, pp. 149-157.
59. Bloom, *Critical Views*, p. 54.